

Optical and infrared observations of the supernova SN 1999el¹

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ABSTRACT

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Optical and near-infrared light curves of the Type IIn supernova 1999el in NGC 6951 are presented. A period of 220 days (416 days in the near-infrared) is covered from the first observation obtained a few days before maximum light. Spectroscopic observations are also discussed. Using as a distance calibrator the Type Ia SN 2000E, which occurred some months later in the same galaxy, and fitting a blackbody law to the photometric data we obtain a maximum bolometric luminosity for SN 1999el of $\sim 10^{44}$ erg s $^{-1}$. In general, the photometric properties of SN 1999el are very similar to those of SN 1998S, a bright and well studied Type IIn SN, showing a fast decline in all observed bands similar to those of Type II-L SNe. The differences with SN 1998S are analyzed and ascribed to the differences in a pre-existing circumstellar envelope in which dust was already present at the moment of the SN outburst. We infer that light echoes may play a possibly significant role in affecting the observed properties of the light curves, although improved theoretical models are needed to account for the data. We conclude that mass loss in the progenitor RG stars is episodic and occurs in an asymmetric way. This implies that collapsing massive stars appear as normal Type II SN if this occurs far from major mass loss episodes, whereas they appear as Type IIn SNe if a large mass loss episode is in progress.

Subject headings: supernovae: general — supernovae: individual (SN 1999el) — galaxies: individual (NGC 6951) — infrared:stars

1. Introduction

A significant fraction of the total number of Type II supernovae (SN II) show distinctive features which led Schlegel (1990) to introduce the class of SN IIn. These objects are characterized by a blue continuum near maximum and a slow temporal evolution of the spectrum; the slowly declining luminosity in the optical bands and the narrow H α line profile superimposed on a broad base indicate the presence of diffuse lower velocity matter around the site of the explosion. Because of their relatively high luminosity and slowly declining light curve, the SN IIn are easier to discover than faint, narrow peak light curve

¹Based on observations collected with the AZT-24 telescope (Campo Imperatore, Italy), the 1.8-m telescope of the Osservatorio Astronomico di Padova (Asiago, Italy), the TNT telescope operated by the Osservatorio Astronomico di Collurania-Teramo (Teramo, Italy), the Italian National Telescope TNG (La Palma, Canary Islands, Spain), the 1-m telescope of the Observatorio Astronómico Nacional (Tonantzintla, Mexico), the 2.1-m telescope of the Guillermo Haro Observatory (Cananea, Mexico).

objects. Their intrinsic frequency has been estimated by Cappellaro et al. (1997) to be 5% of all SN II. There is, however, a marked inhomogeneity among the events (Cappellaro & Turatto 2001), namely concerning the decline rate of the light curves, a matter which merits understanding. It has not yet been clarified to what extent individual differences among members of this type of SNe can be totally ascribed to the physical properties of pre-existing circumstellar matter (CSM).

In fact, recent attempts to explain the long term properties of visual light curves (LCs) with light echoes from circumstellar matter by Roscherr & Schaefer (2000) have not been fully successful. There are observational features which disagree with echo model predictions, forcing these authors to conclude that any pre-existing dust around the site of the explosion must be almost completely destroyed at the moment of the outburst. However, this contrasts with the observed late infrared emission from SN 1998S, which has been inferred to result from dust cooling (Fassia et al. 2000). Based on their observational data, Fassia et al. argue that dust was already present within the precursor wind of SN 1998S, and hence at least a fraction of it must have survived the explosion. This suggests that improved observations are needed in order to understand the environment of SN sites from this diagnostic tool. So far only a few of the models developed to test the effects of light echoes have taken into account the near infrared (NIR) light curves (see Emmering & Chevalier 1988).

On the other hand, the slow decline of light curves for Type IIn SNe appears to be well accounted for by simple models of ejecta-wind interactions (Terlevich 1994; Plewa 1995). At the same time, the peculiar shape of the emission lines has been also attributed to ejecta-wind interactions involving a two-component wind, characterized by dense clumps (or a dense equatorial wind) associated with a less dense spherically symmetric distribution (Chugai & Danziger 1994).

Therefore, several open questions remain, which can be formulated as follows:

1. How important is the issue of the inhomogeneity of this class of events and what causes this inhomogeneity?
2. What is the evolutionary scenario causing some massive precursors of SNe to explode within a pre-existing envelope of diffuse circumstellar matter and what physical mechanisms affect the observational properties?
3. Is dust present in the CSM before the explosion?
4. To what extent do echo processes and ejecta-wind interactions determine the observational properties of such SNe?

In this paper we present optical and infrared data for the Type IIn SN 1999el. The present work provides new photometric measurements and improves the observational constraints on this class of SNe. Observations and data reduction are presented in section 2. The results are presented and discussed in sections 3 and 4, and summarized in section 5.

2. Observations and data reduction

SN 1999el was discovered on October 20.45 UT (julian day 2451472) at mag ~ 15.4 (unfiltered) by the BAO SN Survey (Cao et al. 1999, IAUC 7288) $\sim 23.4''$ east and $\sim 9''$ south of the galactic nucleus of NGC 6951, an inclined ($i = 42^\circ$) barred spiral galaxy hosting a type 2 Seyfert AGN, located at $\alpha(1950) = 20 : 36 : 36.59$ and $\delta(1950) = +65 : 55 : 46.00$ (see Fig. 1). For a list of galactic properties see, e. g., Kohno, Kawabe, & Vila-Vilaró (1999) and references therein. The distance to NGC 6951 was recently discussed by Vinkó et al. (2001). The estimated distance moduli range from 31.85 mag (23.4 Mpc) to 32.59 mag (33 Mpc), where the lowest values are based on the Tully-Fisher relation and the highest ones on the multi-color light curve shape (MLCS) method applied to the SN 2000E (a Type Ia SN). We adopt our own determination (32.1 ± 0.4 mag) based on our observations of SN 2000E (see Valentini et al. 2002, in preparation).

Cao et al. (1999) report no trace of the SN on images taken on October 19.2 by KAIT (to a limiting magnitude of 18) and on October 19.44 by BAO, so we can assume October 20.00 as the zero point for the light curves, since it must be very close (within a few hours) to the shock breakout time. According to Cao et al. (1999), an image taken on October 21.44 indicates a magnitude of 15.0 for the supernova, whereas on October 22.2 it appeared at a magnitude of 15.2 (no band is indicated). It can be seen from Fig. 1 that SN 1999el is projected between two nearby foreground stars (c2 and c3) with a separation of no more

Fig. 1.— V band image of SN 1999el in the galaxy NGC 6951 obtained at the TNG on JD 2451690. Stars of the local sequence are indicated by numbers (#6 is out of the displayed field). The enlarged box shows the supernova, which lies towards a group of close projected stars referred to as c1, c2 and c3 in the text.

than a couple of arcsec.

2.1. Optical data: acquisition, reduction and photometry

Optical photometry of SN 1999el has been obtained on images collected with several telescopes at different sites in the northern hemisphere. These were reduced using the standard techniques for de-biasing and flat-fielding.

One set of data comes from the 0.72-m Teramo-Normale Telescope (TNT), at the Teramo Observatory (Italy). The TNT is an f/14 Ritchey-Chretien reflector equipped with a Tektronic Tk512 CB1-1 front-illuminated 512×512 pixels CCD. The pixel size of $27 \mu\text{m}$ yields a scale of 0.46 arcsec/pixel. During each observational night we obtained 4 to 12 frames per filter in the B, R and I bands.

Other photometry was performed on images obtained with the 1-m telescope operated by the Observatorio Astronómico Nacional in Tonantzintla (Mexico), equipped in the f/15 Cassegrain port with a 1024×1024 Thomson THX 31156 CCD and a Cousins R filter. The field of view covered by this configuration is $4.2' \times 4.2'$. The chip was binned 2×2 and read in standard mode ($3.47 e^-/\text{pixel}$, $2.7e^-/\text{ADU}$). The effective on-chip integration of the SN field was split into 3 to 6 on-chip integrations of 300 s, offset from each-other by $\sim 20''$.

For imaging, also the 1.8-m telescope of the Osservatorio Astronomico di Padova sited in Asiago, Cima Ekar (Italy), equipped with AFOSC, was used. The instrument is a focal reducer type spectrograph/camera with a $1\text{K} \times 1\text{K}$ Site Thinned CCD ($24\mu\text{m}$). The scale of $0.473''/\text{pixel}$ gives a field of $8 \times 8 \text{ arcmin}^2$.

Some photometric data were acquired using the 2.1-m telescope of the Guillermo Haro Observatory in Cananea (Mexico), equipped with the spectrophotometer LFOSC at the f/12 Cassegrain focus. Johnson V and Cousins R filters were used. The chip is a 385×578 EEV P8693, with a field of view of $6' \times 10'$. This was read in the standard readout mode: $8e^-/\text{pixel}$, $4.7e^-/\text{ADU}$. The effective on-chip integration of the SN field was split into 2 to 3 integrations of 60 s in the R -band and of 120 s in the V -band.

Late time $UBVRI$ photometry was obtained with the Optical Imager Galileo (OIG) mounted on the 3.58-m Italian National Telescope (TNG, Roque de los Muchachos, La Palma, Canary Islands) and equipped with a mosaic of two thinned, back-illuminated EEV42-80 CCDs with 2048×4096 pixels each (pixel size $13.5 \mu\text{m}$; pixel scale in 2×2 binned mode $0.144''/\text{pixel}$). These nights were photometric and were used to calibrate the local sequence around the SN (1 to 8, see Fig. 1) which in turn was used for calibrating non-photometric

nights. The instrumental color equations were obtained through observations of stars in the standard fields of Landolt (1992). Three of the local standards (1, 3 and 5) are a subset of those selected by Vinkó et al. (2001) to carry out differential photometry (*BVRI*) on SN2000E (their F1, B1, B3, respectively). The magnitudes adopted in our and their study for those sources agree within 0.05 mag, with two exceptions: we found our star 1 to be 0.13 mag brighter in *R* and our star 5 to be 0.13 mag brighter in *I*. The agreement can be considered good and confirms the validity of both our calibration and that of those authors. However, our measurements were obtained using a larger telescope (the TNG) under very good seeing and photometric conditions. This should have afforded us a better sky subtraction which, particularly at longer wavelengths, may be easily affected by nebular emission from the host galaxy.

During the SN 1999el follow-up observations, another SN event occurred within NGC 6951 (i. e., SN 2000E), so the CCD at the TNT was operated to image the 2 objects on the same frame. The exposure times were chosen so as to achieve the best signal-to-noise ratio for both supernovae, but avoiding saturation of the brightest calibration star in the field.

Since both supernovae are well embedded in the galaxy background, we obtained instrumental magnitudes by point-spread function (PSF) fitting using the DAOPHOT package in IRAF or a set of procedures developed for SN photometry in the same environment. For the TNT and Tonantzintla observations, the final instrumental magnitudes were obtained as an average of all valid values derived for a given night.

Errors have been obtained with artificial star experiments, i.e. placing stars of the same magnitude as the supernova in parts of the galaxy arm characterized by similar complexity as the SN site, then computing the r.m.s. of the derived magnitudes. For TNT images however, the uncertainty in the photometry has been estimated by evaluating the PSF fit residuals and the r.m.s. of the n successive measurements obtained in a single night for the SN after calibration through the local standards. It is more difficult to assess the error due to the convolution of the PSFs of the SN and the nearby sources when their brightness becomes comparable and the seeing is poor, which is the case in the TNT photometry at late epochs. Hence, we omit measurements which appear uncertain because of the inferior quality of the images. Table 1 lists the results of optical photometry for SN 1999el.

Table 1. *UBVRI* photometry for SN 1999el obtained with different instruments.

JD (2451000+)	Epoch (days)	<i>U</i> (mag)	ΔU (mag)	<i>B</i> (mag)	ΔB (mag)	<i>V</i> (mag)	ΔV (mag)	<i>R</i> (mag)	ΔR (mag)	<i>I</i> (mag)
479.42	7.42	-	-	15.87	0.06	-	-	14.71	0.04	14.35
480.45	8.45	-	-	15.87	0.03	-	-	14.68	0.04	14.31
481.58	9.58	-	-	-	-	-	-	14.69	0.02	-
485.31	13.31	-	-	15.83	0.03	-	-	14.60	0.03	14.22
486.25	14.25	-	-	15.82	0.06	-	-	14.56	0.06	14.25
486.50	14.50	15.70	0.05	15.73	0.05	15.11	0.04	14.65	0.03	14.19
486.52	14.52	-	-	-	-	-	-	14.59	0.02	-
486.57	14.57	-	-	-	-	15.04	0.03	14.59	0.20	-
490.48	18.48	15.65	0.03	15.64	0.06	14.98	0.02	14.52	0.04	13.99
490.57	18.57	-	-	-	-	14.92	0.02	14.48	0.04	-
493.60	21.57	-	-	-	-	-	-	14.55	0.04	-
498.68	26.68	-	-	-	-	-	-	14.55	0.02	-
506.21	34.21	-	-	16.41	0.06	-	-	14.86	0.06	14.46
513.59	41.59	-	-	-	-	-	-	15.08	0.10	-
514.25	42.25	-	-	16.76	0.06	-	-	15.20	0.04	-
516.53	44.53	-	-	-	-	-	-	15.13	0.02	-
520.21	48.21	-	-	17.14	0.04	-	-	15.51	0.08	14.85
521.23	49.23	-	-	17.17	0.06	-	-	15.58	0.06	15.01
522.54	50.54	-	-	-	-	-	-	15.33	0.03	-
531.29	59.29	-	-	17.52	0.08	-	-	16.03	0.10	-
561.25	89.25	-	-	19.44	0.30	-	-	17.54	0.20	-
570.27	98.27	-	-	19.67	0.20	-	-	18.40	0.20	17.54
571.25	99.25	-	-	-	-	18.94	0.26	18.46	0.14	-
572.24	100.24	-	-	19.83	0.20	-	-	18.69	0.20	17.64
575.29	103.24	-	-	20.19	0.20	19.19	0.25	18.25	0.18	17.53
585.30	113.30	-	-	20.27	0.16	19.22	0.16	18.42	0.24	17.78
604.50	132.50	21.27	0.40	20.97	0.30	19.52	0.25	18.89	0.15	18.03
605.50	133.50	-	-	-	-	> 19.17	-	19.27	0.30	-
690.50	218.50	21.44	0.20	21.54	0.15	20.49	0.10	19.83	0.10	18.91
698.54	226.54	-	-	21.44	0.40	20.45	0.30	19.81	0.30	18.90

2.2. Infrared data: acquisition, reduction and photometry

Most near-infrared (NIR) observations of SN 1999el were obtained at the AZT-24 1.1-m telescope in Campo Imperatore (Italy) with SWIRCAM, during a period spanning October 25, 1999 to May 26, 2000. SWIRCAM (D’Alessio et al. 2000) incorporates a 256×256 HgCdTe NICMOS-3(-class) detector which, at the focus of AZT-24, yields a scale of $1.04''/\text{pixel}$, resulting in a field of view of $\sim 4 \times 4 \text{ arcmin}^2$. The observations were performed through standard J ($1.25 \mu\text{m}$), H ($1.65 \mu\text{m}$) and K ($2.20 \mu\text{m}$) broad-band filters. Any on-source image was obtained as a median composition of five frames with a 15 arcsec dithering and integration times of 60 s each at the J and H bands, and 120 s each at the K band. Off-source frames were taken with a 10 arcmin offset with the same observational procedure and exposure times, but a larger (50 arcsec) dithering. Sky images obtained as a median of the original dithered off-source frames were subtracted from the single on-source images before composition.

Flat-field frames were acquired at twilight using the differential flat technique that relies on the natural variation of the sky background. In this way, the frames with the highest mean counts are combined together (through median filtering) in one single image, as are those with the lowest mean counts, and the resultant lower signal image is subtracted from the resultant higher signal one so as to remove any biases and dark current. This is used to flat-field each image after sky-subtraction.

Deep JHK_s images of SN 1999el were obtained at the 3.58-m TNG telescope (La Palma) with ARNICA during the night of May 26, 2000. ARNICA is a 256×256 pixels NIR camera (Lisi et al. 1996) and was matched to the TNG with a $0.35 \text{ arcsec/pixel}$ scale (yielding a $90'' \times 90''$ field of view). Sequences of 4 dithered on-source and 4 off-source images were taken moving the telescope to a sky position after each on-source integration. Total on-source integration times amounted to 12 minutes at K_s and 8 minutes at J and H . Five images per band of a group of standard stars (AS 40–5, AS 40–0 and AS 40–1; Hunt et al. 1998) were also obtained so as to locate the brightest of them (AS 40–5) at the center of the array and of each detector quadrant in turn. Flat-field frames in the K_s band were taken at

Table 1—Continued

JD (2451000+)	Epoch (days)	U (mag)	ΔU (mag)	B (mag)	ΔB (mag)	V (mag)	ΔV (mag)	R (mag)	ΔR (mag)	I (mag)
699.55	227.55	-	-	21.42	0.30	20.56	0.30	19.77	0.30	-

sunset. Only the K_s frames were sky-subtracted after flat-fielding; off-source images (or the dithered ones for standard stars) were combined together and used for flat-fielding in the J and H bands. All images in each band were finally corrected for bad-pixels, registered and averaged together.

Late time NIR images were acquired with NICS at the TNG on December 14, 2000 (JD+893) during the commissioning of the camera. NICS is based on a 1024×1024 Hawaii detector (Baffa et al. 2001) and we employed a 0.25 arcsec/pixel scale resulting in a field of view of 4.2×4.2 arcmin². Dithered on-source and off-source frames were taken in the J_s and K' bands with total (on-source) integration times of 1200 s and 420 s, respectively. Data were reduced as described above, but no flat-field frames were available for K' images.

The photometric measurements on SWIRCAM images were performed by PSF fitting using the DAOPHOT package in MIDAS in order to derive relative photometry between the supernova and a set of comparison stars properly selected in the field among the ones with the highest S/N ratio (1 to 9 in Fig. 1), of which those calibrated with the TNG data (see below) are a subset. For these, variability could be ruled out on the basis of an accurate image-by-image check of the fluctuations in their relative magnitudes. PSF fitting photometry was also needed owing to the partial convolution of the SN with the sources c1, c2 and c3 of Fig. 1.

The presence of the parent galaxy background has been taken into account by evaluating its influence on the derived photometry of the SN. In particular cases, i. e., when the S/N ratio was low, PSF fitting photometry was carried out using the ROMAFOT package in MIDAS, by means of which the background gradient due to the diffuse emission from the galaxy was accounted for by adopting a tilted plane.

Both aperture and PSF fitting photometry were performed on the ARNICA images for field stars using the package DAOPHOT in IRAF (Stetson 1987). However, we obtained more satisfactory PSF fits to SN 1999el using the package ROMAFOT in MIDAS. The group of 3 stars close, in projection, to the supernova, all resolved on the TNG images (see Fig. 1), is composed of, following the nomenclature used in the figure, c2 ($K_s = 14.97 \pm 0.03$), ~ 2 arcsec east of the SN, c3 ($K_s = 16.75 \pm 0.32$), ~ 2 arcsec west of the SN, and c1 ($K_s \sim 19$). The observed standard stars were used to calibrate both the SN and the field stars 2 and 9 (see Fig. 1) which served as references for the photometry on SWIRCAM frames. K_s magnitudes were converted into K magnitudes by extrapolating the continuum flux within the spectral region ($\sim 0.1 \mu\text{m}$ wide) of K not covered by the K_s filter, with corrections amounting to ≤ 0.02 mag for the standard stars and to 0.06 mag for SN 1999el (the uncorrected sources being fainter). Possible CO molecular line emission falling out of K_s but within K , and sometimes occurring in the case of Type II_n SNe, was therefore not detected and could not

account for any fraction of the measured flux. The photometry of the standard stars for the 5 positions on the array indicates that residual errors of ~ 0.05 , ~ 0.04 and ~ 0.02 mag in the J , H and K_s bands, respectively, are still present owing to flat-field inaccuracies.

Differential photometry on the NICS images was performed by PSF fitting using RO-MAFOT in MIDAS. By inter-comparing instrumental magnitudes obtained both for the field (and local standard) stars and for the close-by sources (c1-c3), we checked that even though not flat-fielded, K' values were consistent at a $0.1 - 0.2$ mag level with ARNICA photometry throughout the whole final frame. We conservatively assumed uncertainties ~ 0.5 mag both for J_s and for K' and did not correct for the slight differences with the J and K bands. Table 2 lists the results of NIR photometry for SN 1999el.

2.3. Spectroscopy

Two spectra of the SN have been obtained a few hours apart in Asiago (November 7, 1999) and Cananea (November 8), i.e. about 18 days after the discovery. In Fig. 2 we show the latter obtained with a 5.5 \AA/pixel grism, which for a $3''$ slit-width, yields a resolution of $\sim 16 \text{ \AA}$ in the $4000\text{--}7200\text{\AA}$ range. The total 4400 s exposure was split into 3 integrations to minimize the effect of cosmic rays. Wavelength calibrations were obtained using comparison spectra of HeArNe lamps, while the instrumental signature has been removed using a spectrophotometric standard star.

3. Results and analysis

3.1. Optical spectrum

The spectrum (Fig. 2) confirms the early finding by Filippenko (1999) that the SN shows lines with narrow components. Superimposed on the continuum there are strong, relatively narrow Balmer emission lines of H together with wider weak wings. The broad wings could be fitted with Gaussian profiles having FWHM of about $2500\text{--}3000 \text{ km s}^{-1}$, while the narrow ones are barely resolved. Also narrow P-Cyg absorption components with minima displaced by about $600\text{--}900 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ relative to the emission-line cores are present, indicating a slowly expanding shell of gas above the photosphere. Fe II lines have similar structures. Weak NaI D lines are visible.

In Fig.2 we compare the spectrum of SN 1999el with those of other H-dominated SNe at similar epochs showing signs of interaction with the CSM. The SN 1999el spectrum is

Table 2. NIR photometry of SN 1999el obtained with SWIRCAM, ARNICA and NICS.

Julian day (2451000+)	Epoch (days)	J (mag)	ΔJ (mag)	H (mag)	ΔH (mag)	K (mag)	ΔK (mag)	Telescope
477.31	5.31	13.69	0.03	13.30	0.05	12.70	0.09	AZT-24
479.25	7.25	13.62	0.08	13.25	0.08	12.68	0.08	AZT-24
480.28	8.28	-	-	13.28	0.09	-	-	AZT-24
481.37	9.37	13.58	0.08	13.29	0.09	12.75	0.09	AZT-24
483.41	11.41	13.55	0.10	13.25	0.06	-	-	AZT-24
484.31	12.31	-	-	13.08	0.08	-	-	AZT-24
485.41	13.41	13.55	0.08	13.28	0.07	-	-	AZT-24
486.35	14.35	13.51	0.06	-	-	-	-	AZT-24
492.32	20.32	13.46	0.06	13.18	0.15	-	-	AZT-24
493.28	21.28	13.53	0.08	13.40	0.09	12.94	0.06	AZT-24
494.50	22.50	13.43	0.07	-	-	-	-	AZT-24
495.20	23.20	13.54	0.07	13.36	0.08	-	-	AZT-24
506.45	34.45	13.73	0.07	13.52	0.07	13.17	0.05	AZT-24
507.23	35.23	13.72	0.07	-	-	-	-	AZT-24
514.25	42.25	13.85	0.10	13.77	0.09	13.30	0.06	AZT-24
521.25	49.25	13.96	0.05	-	-	13.49	0.07	AZT-24
531.71	59.71	-	-	14.24	0.09	-	-	AZT-24
532.28	60.28	14.24	0.08	-	-	13.91	0.08	AZT-24
548.21	76.21	14.88	0.04	-	-	14.40	0.05	AZT-24
549.22	77.22	14.92	0.03	-	-	14.47	0.06	AZT-24
550.24	78.24	14.99	0.04	14.75	0.15	14.53	0.04	AZT-24
576.24	104.24	17.20	0.30	16.60	0.30	16.00	0.20	AZT-24
585.71	113.71	17.50	0.50	16.60	0.40	-	-	AZT-24
624.59	152.59	17.70	0.60	17.60	0.50	16.40	0.60	AZT-24
691.62	219.62	18.31	0.40	17.84	0.50	16.43	0.25	TNG/ARNICA
893.34	421.34	20.01	0.50	-	-	17.40	0.50	TNG/NICS

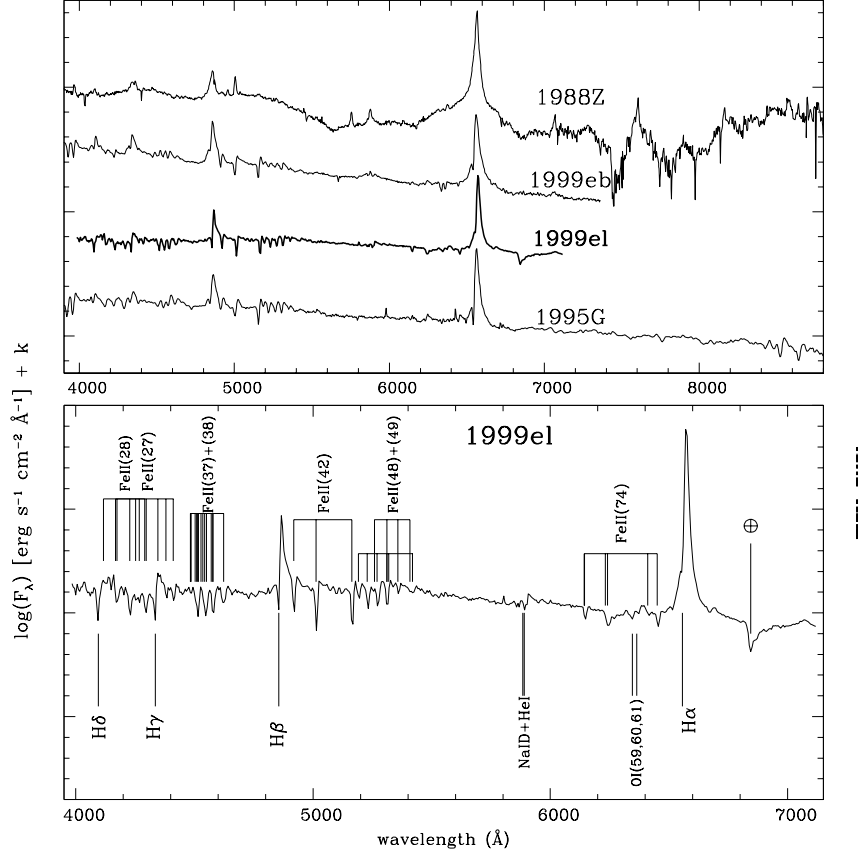


Fig. 2.— Identification of the lines on the optical spectrum of SN 1999el obtained on November 8, 1999, in Cananea (lower panel). Comparison with other SN spectra is shown in the upper panel. Vertical bars indicate the position of absorption lines blue-shifted by $\sim 600\text{--}900 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ with respect to the emission lines cores.

very different from the spectra of SN 1988Z, the best studied Type IIn SN (Stathakis & Sadler 1991; Turatto et al. 1993; Chugai & Danziger 1994; Aretxaga et al. 1999). The line widths of SN 1988Z are much broader, implying expansion velocities of about 15000 km s^{-1} . On the contrary the spectrum of SN 1999el closely resembles those of SNe 1999eb and 1995G (Pastorello et al. 2002, in preparation) at comparable age. They have similar continua, strong emission lines with similar profiles and narrow absorption components. It is the very narrow blue shifted absorption component particularly in the wing of the broad $H\alpha$ from the expanding envelope that is characteristic of a class of SNe, such as SN 1996L (Benetti et al. 1999), SN 1994aj (Benetti et al. 1998) and SN 1984E (Dopita et al. 1984). This absorption is commonly thought to arise from the CSM in the form of a wind.

3.2. Light curves

Figure 3 shows the LCs at optical and NIR bands; we draw attention to some particular features. Firstly, we see that a maximum of emission in the K band has not been observed. However, it seems that LC maxima in the other NIR and optical bands have been recorded. There are indications of small delays in the time of maxima occurrence which increase with a decrease of wavelength. During the first 90 days, the decline rate is quite fast reminiscent of that of a Type II-L SN rather than that of a typical IIn SN, as already noted. After 90 days the LCs exhibit a much slower decrease and, in particular, that of the K band flattens most. Since the K point at JD+690 has been derived from a K_s measurement and any possible line contribution from CO emission is therefore excluded, the late behavior of the LC in K is not due to CO line emission. Note that this point has been derived from TNG observations, so the SN and its nearby sources are well resolved. The NIR LCs appear to remain flat up to JD+893 (~ 420 days from the shock outbreak), even if in the J band the decrease seems slightly faster than in the K band.

Figure 4 shows the time evolution of a series of color indices. We note the blueing in $J - H$ and $J - K$ during the first ~ 45 days (including ~ 10 days before the occurrence of maximum in the J band). Afterwards, starting approximately around JD+550, a reddening in $J - K$ and $J - H$ colors begins to be evident. The increase in errors which is significant after JD+550 (affecting all colors) is due to the SN magnitude becoming comparable with that of the brightest of the nearby field stars, the two sources being difficult to deconvolve on the images from the smaller telescopes, even though we already noted that the K point obtained at late times from TNG images (JD+690) is well established. This reddening effect is also evident as a flattening of the K LC whereas J and H are still slightly steeper in their decline (see Fig. 3) and can be attributed to an infrared excess arising at later phases.

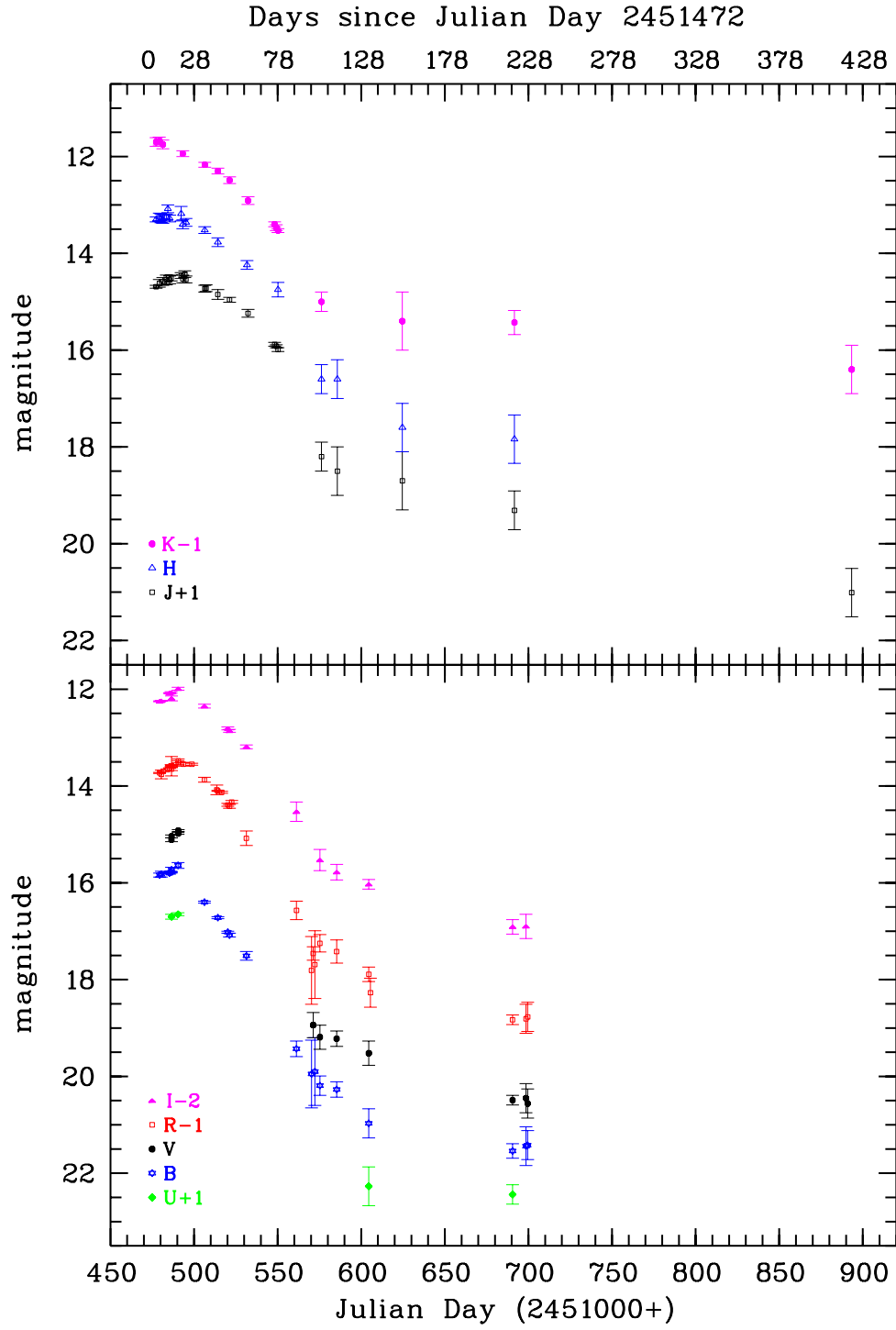


Fig. 3.— Optical and infrared light curves of the SN 1999el. Errors marked by the bars are those indicated in Table 1 and 2.

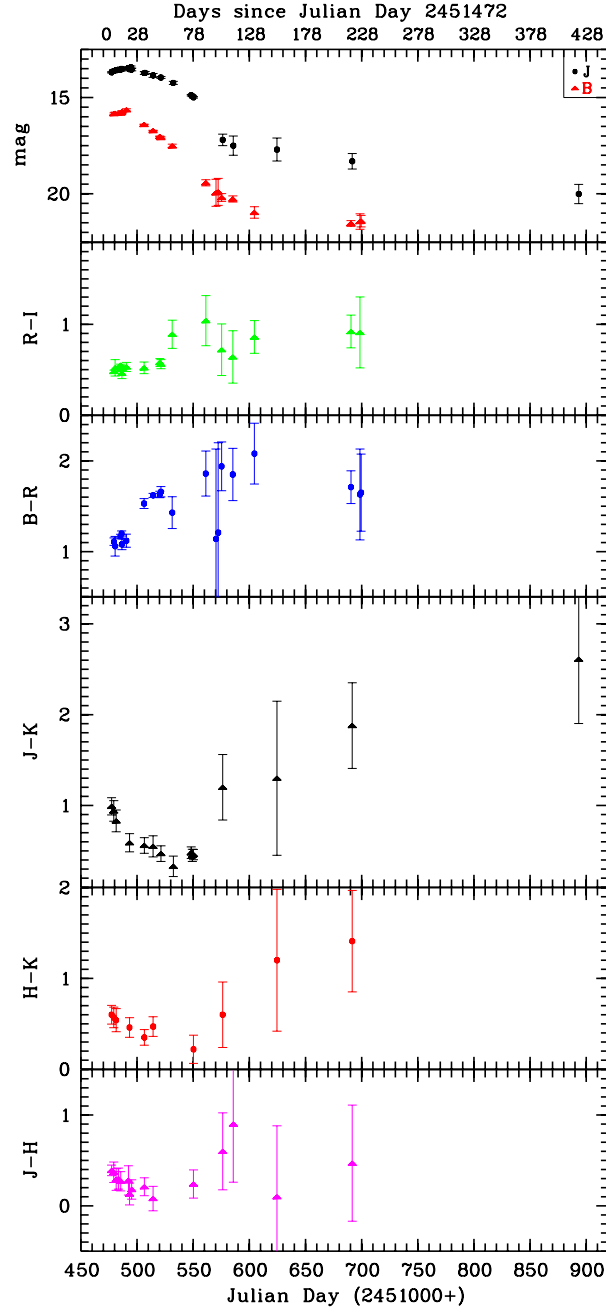


Fig. 4.— Optical and infrared colors of the SN 1999el. For the sake of comparison, in the upper box an optical (B) and an infrared (J) LC are displayed.

SN 1999el exhibits a more standard behavior in $B - R$, which increases after maximum and then flattens after ~ 70 days. This may be understood in terms of a cooling photosphere. In fact, the same trend seems to characterize all optical colors, with a change of ~ 0.5 mag in a period spanning ~ 200 days.

The behavior of the NIR emission can be followed on a color-color diagram ($H - K$ vs. $J - H$; see Fig. 5). Comparing the SN colors with the main sequence locus (solid line), the blackbody locus (dashed line) and the reddening law (arrow), a NIR excess is evident even at early epochs and this cannot be simply explained as reddened blackbody or stellar photospheric emission. After day 5, the colors evolve roughly along a track which appears almost parallel to the reddening law, evolving as if A_V decreases with time. However, on day 219, a strong K excess is present. The most likely cause for the NIR excess is continuum emission from hot dust pre-existing within the CSM of SN 1999el. Following Fassia et al. (2000), we can test this scenario in the following way. Given the (reddened) flux in the K band for day 5, $3.39 \times 10^{-12} \text{ erg cm}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1} \mu\text{m}^{-1}$, and the distance assumed in Sect. 3.4, we can determine the radius of a blackbody surface emitting the same luminosity in K at 1500 K, roughly the dust sublimation temperature. It can be shown that reddening does not change the result by more than a 10–20%. This radius, $1.5 \times 10^{16} \text{ cm}$, is comparable to the light travel distance from the explosion time to day 5, $\sim 1.3 \times 10^{16} \text{ cm}$. Thus the two independently determined distances are consistent with the presence of dust at a radius where it has not sublimated and radiates at IR wavelengths as a result of heating by UV photons from the original outburst.

3.3. Reddening

In order to give an estimate of the absolute luminosity of SN 1999el it is necessary to determine its reddening. As can be seen in Fig. 2, the interstellar lines of NaI cannot be resolved and therefore add little useful information. Hence, we can only assume the galactic value as a lower limit. From the maps of Schlegel, Finkbeiner, & Davis (1998) we obtain $A_B = 1.57 \text{ mag}$. This map appears to systematically overestimate the extinction where $E(B - V) \geq 0.15 \text{ mag}$, as pointed out by Arce & Goodman (1999). Since this occurs towards SN 1999el, as well, we expect a lower galactic contribution to the extinction. We dereddened optical and NIR magnitudes using the interstellar extinction law given by Cardelli, Clayton, & Mathis (1989) and assuming an A_V ranging between 1.18 (corresponding to $A_B = 1.57 \text{ mag}$) and 2.5 mag. These were then converted to fluxes according to Bessel (1979) and, in the NIR bands, the calibration given for the UKIRT standard. In Table 3 both apparent and absolute (dereddened) magnitudes at maxima are listed.

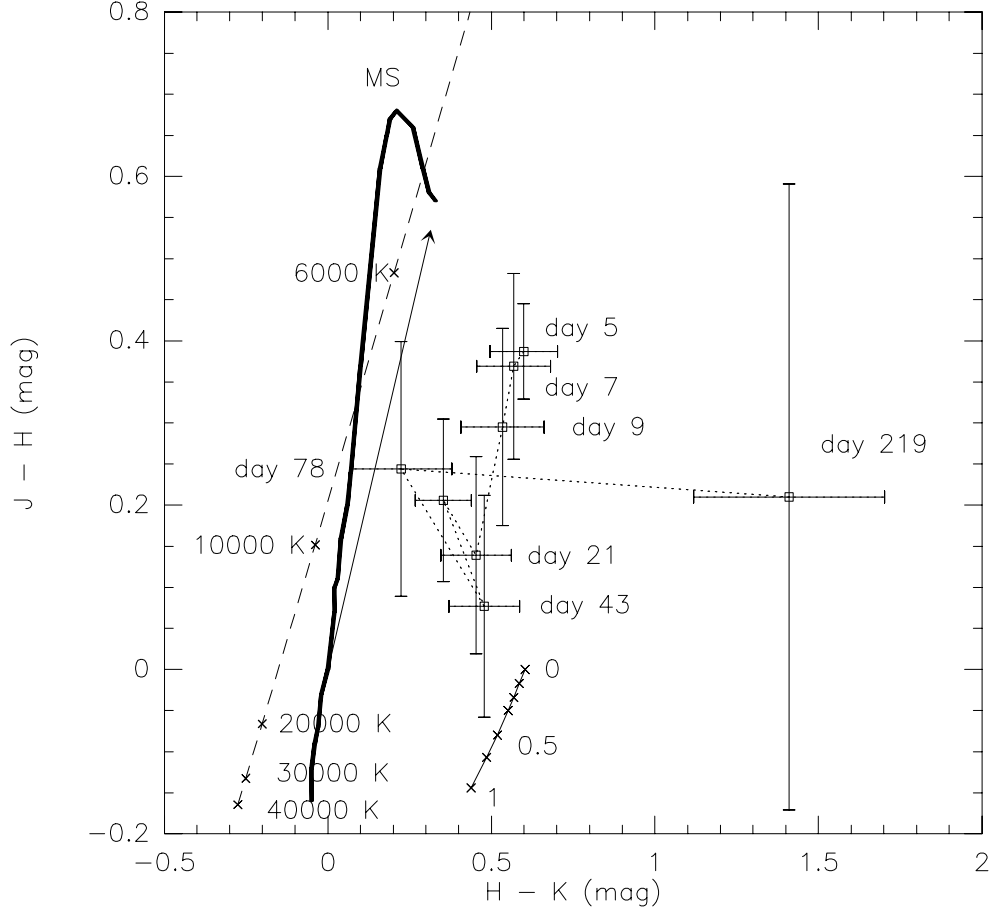


Fig. 5.— Color-color diagram ($H - K$ vs. $J - H$) showing the time evolution of the NIR emission of SN 1999el. The open squares (with error bars) mark the measured colors, which evolve along the dotted line from the 5th day from the discovery to the 219th day (the epoch is indicated near each data point). The solid black line reproduces the main sequence locus from O6–8 to M8 stars (according to the colors given by Koornneef 1983), whereas the arrow from (0, 0) corresponds to a reddening $A_V = 5$ mag according to the standard law of Cardelli et al. (1989). The dashed line indicates blackbody colors with crosses at $T=40000$, 30000, 20000, 10000 and 6000 K. The effect of including FeII line emission at 1.26 and 1.64 μm superimposed on a NIR continuum (assumed from the JHK values on the 5th day) is shown by the solid line below the point of the 43rd day. The shifts are labeled in units (0,0.5,1) of the ratio of line integrated emission at 1.26 μm to the overall K -band integrated continuum flux. For the sake of clarity, the line has been moved downward by 0.395 mag (i. e., the mark labeled as 0 actually falls over the point of day 5).

3.4. Blackbody fits

We fitted a blackbody law to the dereddened fluxes in order to get estimates of the photospheric temperature. Since not all bands are covered on the same days, we constructed sets of *UBVRIJHK* fluxes complementing the available values with ones obtained through interpolation or using the results of spline fits to all data in a given wavelength. Then, we adopted a one-parameter procedure for χ^2 minimisation normalizing, for each selected day, all fluxes to that in the *R*-band in order to remove the dependence on radius and distance. *R* was chosen because it is the better sampled band (see Table 1) and is likely to be much less affected by dust emission than the NIR bands. Two of the fits are shown in Fig. 6 as examples of earlier and later epoch emission.

The resulting photospheric temperatures are listed in Table 4 and shown in Fig. 7a for $A_V = 1.18$ and 2.5 mag. The temperatures for $A_V = 2.50$ mag are similar to those derived in the case of SN 1998S (Fassia et al. 2000); an extinction as large as $A_V = 3.00$ mag drives the photospheric temperature at early phases towards values which appear too high. Hence, A_V cannot much exceed ~ 2.5 mag and $A_V = 1.18$ mag can be safely assumed as a lower limit.

We performed several tests in order to evaluate the quality of our fits. Most important, we repeated our procedure normalizing all fluxes to that in the *V* band. The differences between these newly obtained values and those listed in Table 4 increase with A_V , ranging from $< 6\%$ for $A_V = 1.18$ mag, to $< 20\%$ for $A_V = 2.50$ mag. The most sensitive variations are observed on JD+495 (temperatures from *V*-normalized data hotter by 23% for $A_V = 2.50$ mag than those from *R*-normalized data) and on JD+506 (with a similar trend). Here, two kinds of problems exist. First, when $\lambda T \gg hc/k$ a λ_0 -normalized blackbody flux tends to become equal to $(\lambda_0/\lambda)^4$ and no longer depends on temperature. This occurs for $T \gg 30000$ K in the *V*-band and $T \gg 40000$ K in the *U*-band. Then, our fits are not reliable for very high temperatures. Second, differences in the results obtained by varying the normalization band may be related to the general increase in temperature found when excluding NIR fluxes from the fits (amounting, e. g., to up to 60% for $A_V = 2.50$ mag), although the trend shown in Fig. 7a remains unchanged. This reflects physical differences in the regions which emit the bulk of radiation at different wavelengths (particularly, in the optical and in the near-infrared). As an example, for SN 1998S Anupama, Sivarani, & Pandey (2001) when fitting blackbody curves to optical spectra find photospheric temperatures up to 30 % hotter than those obtained by Fassia et al. (2000) from photometric data including NIR fluxes. We also repeated our fitting procedure excluding fluxes in the *U* band, where we have very few measurements. This yields somewhat higher temperatures, but only at early epochs (20 % on JD+486 and 60% on JD+490 for $A_V = 2.50$ mag); thereafter, differences amount

Table 3. Apparent and absolute (dereddened) magnitudes for all observed photometric bands.

Band	Rel. mag	$A_V = 1.18$	$A_V = 2.50$
		Abs. mag	Abs. mag
<i>U</i>	15.7	−18.3	−20.3
<i>B</i>	15.6	−18.1	−19.8
<i>V</i>	15.0	−18.3	−19.6
<i>R</i>	14.5	−18.5	−19.5
<i>I</i>	14.0	−18.7	−19.3
<i>J</i>	13.4	−19.0	−19.4
<i>H</i>	13.1	−19.2	−19.5
<i>K</i>	12.7	−19.5	−19.7

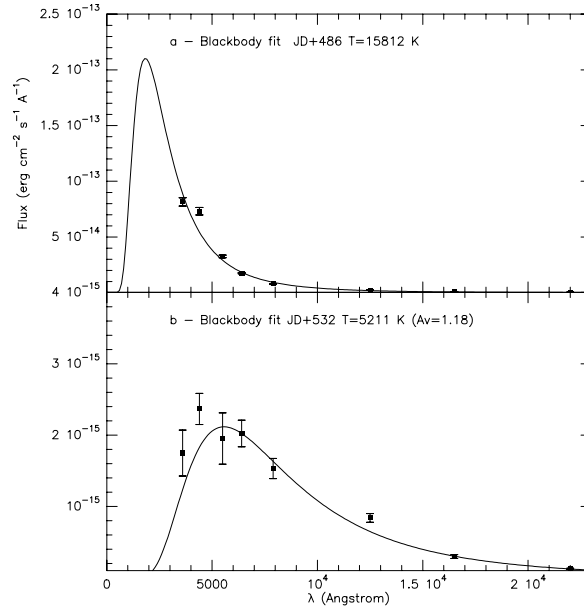


Fig. 6.— Blackbody fits to the dereddened fluxes for (a) JD+486 (assuming $A_V = 2.50 \text{ mag}$) and (b) JD+532 (assuming $A_V = 1.18 \text{ mag}$).

Table 4. Photospheric temperatures from blackbody curve fits for different extinctions.

Julian Day	Epoch (days)	$A_V = 1.18$ $T(K)$	$A_V = 2.50$ $T(K)$
479	7	7468 ± 2390	22370 ± 14717
485	13	7852 ± 2217	24254 ± 13135
486	14	7561 ± 1758	15812 ± 4901
490	18	7462 ± 1065	15066 ± 2629
495	23	6877 ± 534	12875 ± 1579
506	34	6533 ± 369	12245 ± 1488
514	42	5957 ± 310	9791 ± 871
521	49	5591 ± 389	9405 ± 1429
532	60	5211 ± 262	7683 ± 587
550	78	4699 ± 182	6488 ± 350
561	89	4997 ± 377	7262 ± 774
575	103	5419 ± 441	8220 ± 874
585	113	5145 ± 498	7586 ± 987
604	132	5029 ± 254	7457 ± 419
690	218	5660 ± 489	9487 ± 1480
698	226	4910 ± 205	7026 ± 474

to only a few percent. A major source of uncertainty is line emission in the photometric bands. Particularly at later stages (> 100 days from LCs maxima), lines affecting the photometry in the I and R bands may develop (see Danziger et al. 1988) causing temperature underestimates.

The errors listed in Table 4 (calculated as the square root of the quadratic sum of the temperature residuals in the various bands) are largely dominated by those involving the NIR fluxes. We have already discussed the indication of a NIR excess from JHK colors. This is further demonstrated by plotting the blackbody temperatures obtained scaling the dereddened fluxes in the NIR to the ratio of observed to blackbody fluxes in the R -band (which is equal to the square of the ratio of photospheric radius to distance). As shown in Fig. 7b, higher NIR temperatures are derived at both early and late epochs. This may be reconciled if the NIR fluxes are not photospheric in origin but come from larger (cooler) regions starting soon after the explosion and continuing. Interestingly, an excess in the J band is exhibited until JD+560 and is quite evident during the period (JD+)520–550 (see also Fig. 3); it corresponds to the noted blueing at early days. The K -band excess at late epochs is very strong, so much so that the flux has been left out when evaluating the error for JD+604, JD+690 and JD+698. Fluctuations in the derived photospheric temperatures are appreciable in Fig. 7a and may be related to the undersampling of LCs in some bands (e. g., U and V). Unaccounted for line emission may also contribute. The apparent warming during the period (JD+)550–600 coincides with the fading of the SN towards brightness values similar to those of the brightest and closest star and it may indicate that the two sources could not be accurately deconvolved at this epoch.

In conclusion, the photospheric temperatures derived from blackbody fits between (JD+)486–690 are mostly affected by uncertainties related to the unknown extinction, line emission within the photometric bands and the degree of NIR excess. We believe that assuming $A_V = 1.18$ mag and $A_V = 2.50$ mag should result in lower and upper limits whose errors are otherwise not larger than those intrinsic to other similar studies (such as Fassia et al. 2000). Most significantly, the temporal evolution appears well defined.

3.5. Physical parameters of the SN photosphere

The photospheric radius was determined from the ratio of blackbody to observed fluxes in the R -band. We slightly revised the distance to the host galaxy, assuming 26.3 ± 4.8 Mpc, from the distance modulus (32.1 ± 0.4 mag) we derived from our own observations of SN 2000E. Once the photospheric radius and temperature are known, the absolute bolometric luminosity can be estimated through the Stefan-Boltzmann law. A photospheric velocity was

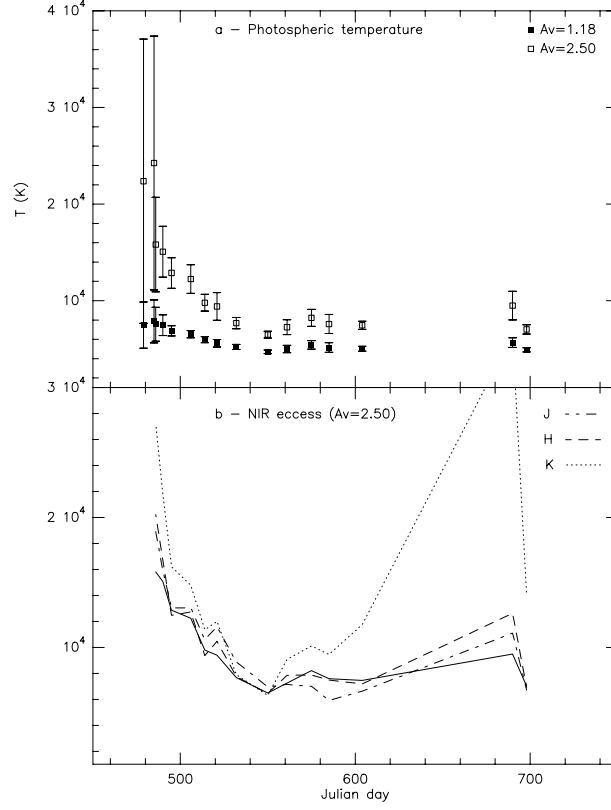


Fig. 7.— **a** Photospheric temperatures for different assumptions on the extinction and **b** blackbody temperatures obtained from the NIR fluxes (for $A_V = 2.5$ mag) scaled using a dilution factor equal to the ratio of observed to blackbody flux in the R band, compared to the photospheric temperature (solid black line).

also derived as the ratio of radius to elapsed time from epoch 0. These data are listed in Table 5 in the cases $A_V = 1.18$ mag and $A_V = 2.5$ mag and shown in Fig 8. Quoted errors include the uncertainties in photospheric temperatures and measured fluxes, but not on the distance, since this would affect all data similarly. Note that increasing the photospheric temperature, e. g., by assuming larger extinctions, produces smaller radii and velocities; this confirms that A_V cannot much exceed the galactic value and rules out the occurrence of very high photospheric temperatures.

Qualitatively, the photospheric radius, velocity and the bolometric luminosity exhibit the same behavior revealed by Fassia et al. (2000) for SN 1998S. The photospheric radius increases during the first 30 days, stays roughly constant until ~ 80 days from epoch 0 and then declines. The exact amount of the variations depends on the assumed extinction. The decrease in the photospheric velocity during the period 30–80 days is probably caused by the recession of the hydrogen recombination front through the expanding ejecta. However, an in-depth comparison is prevented by the uncertainty in the extinction of SN 1999el. Again, similarly to what was found for SN 1998S by Fassia et al. (2000), at around 100 days after outburst the light curve (see Fig. 8c) slows to the point of approximating the radioactive decay of ^{56}Co . As shown in Fig. 8c, $0.07 M_\odot$ of ^{56}Ni (based on the relation given by Branch (1992) or direct comparison with SN 1987A) could power the luminosity at later epochs for $A_V = 2.5$ mag and can be assumed as an upper limit to the mass of ^{56}Ni produced by the explosion.

4. Discussion

The early evolution (within ~ 100 days) of the light curves of SN 1999el indicates that this is one of the most rapidly declining Type IIn SN among those studied so far. It is useful to compare its features with those of SN 1998S, the other recent and extensively observed Type IIn SN (Fassia et al. 2000). In the B band, SN 1999el exhibits a luminosity decrease even faster than that of SN 1998S and is more similar to a Type II linear SN than to previously studied Type IIn SNe, such as SN 1998Z or SN 1997ab. The light curves at various wavelengths of SN 1999el, with their steep decline, are closer to those of SNe 1994aj (Benetti et al. 1999) and 1996L (Benetti et al. 1998) than to that of SN 1995G (Pastorello et al. 2002), whose spectrum is on the contrary very similar to that of SN 1999el, as noted in Sect. 3.1. Therefore, the indication of interaction with the CSM arising from the spectrum is not supported by the rapidly declining light curve. Consequently, type IIn SNe seem to embrace a wide range of characteristics. Therefore the differences between SN 1999el and SN 1998S are worth noting.

Table 5. Photospheric radius, velocity and absolute luminosity for different extinctions.

Julian day	Epoch (days)	$A_V = 1.18$			$A_V = 2.50$		
		Radius 10^{15} cm	Velocity 10^3 km s $^{-1}$	Bol. luminosity 10^{43} erg s $^{-1}$	Radius 10^{15} cm	Velocity 10^3 km s $^{-1}$	Bol. lu 10^{43}
479	7	1.6 ± 0.8	25.81 ± 13.09	$0.54^{+0.88}_{-0.51}$	0.74 ± 0.39	12.20 ± 6.37	9.7
485	13	1.5 ± 0.7	13.52 ± 5.80	$0.62^{+0.89}_{-0.57}$	0.73 ± 0.30	6.49 ± 2.70	13
486	14	1.6 ± 0.6	13.01 ± 4.75	$0.58^{+0.68}_{-0.50}$	1.0 ± 0.3	8.45 ± 2.46	4.
490	18	1.7 ± 0.4	10.97 ± 2.49	$0.64^{+0.47}_{-0.44}$	1.1 ± 0.2	7.30 ± 1.23	4.
495	23	1.9 ± 0.3	9.67 ± 1.35	$0.59^{+0.25}_{-0.27}$	1.3 ± 0.2	6.60 ± 0.91	3.
506	34	1.8 ± 0.2	6.21 ± 0.65	$0.43^{+0.13}_{-0.15}$	1.2 ± 0.2	4.09 ± 0.55	2.
514	42	1.9 ± 0.2	5.10 ± 0.52	$0.31^{+0.09}_{-0.11}$	1.3 ± 0.2	3.69 ± 0.42	1.
521	49	1.8 ± 0.3	4.16 ± 0.60	$0.22^{+0.09}_{-0.10}$	1.2 ± 0.2	2.79 ± 0.56	0.7
532	60	1.7 ± 0.2	3.25 ± 0.39	$0.15^{+0.05}_{-0.05}$	1.3 ± 0.2	2.51 ± 0.32	0.4
550	78	1.4 ± 0.2	2.14 ± 0.22	$0.072^{+0.019}_{-0.023}$	1.2 ± 0.1	1.73 ± 0.18	0.1
561	89	0.9 ± 0.2	1.18 ± 0.23	$0.037^{+0.018}_{-0.019}$	0.70 ± 0.13	0.91 ± 0.18	0.1
575	103	0.5 ± 0.1	0.62 ± 0.12	$0.019^{+0.009}_{-0.010}$	0.42 ± 0.07	0.47 ± 0.08	0.05
585	113	0.6 ± 0.1	0.58 ± 0.14	$0.016^{+0.010}_{-0.010}$	0.44 ± 0.10	0.45 ± 0.10	0.04
604	132	0.48 ± 0.06	0.42 ± 0.06	$0.011^{+0.004}_{-0.004}$	0.36 ± 0.04	0.32 ± 0.04	0.02
690	218	0.24 ± 0.04	0.13 ± 0.02	$0.004^{+0.002}_{-0.002}$	0.17 ± 0.03	0.09 ± 0.02	0.01
698	226	0.33 ± 0.06	0.17 ± 0.03	$0.005^{+0.002}_{-0.002}$	0.26 ± 0.05	0.13 ± 0.02	0.0

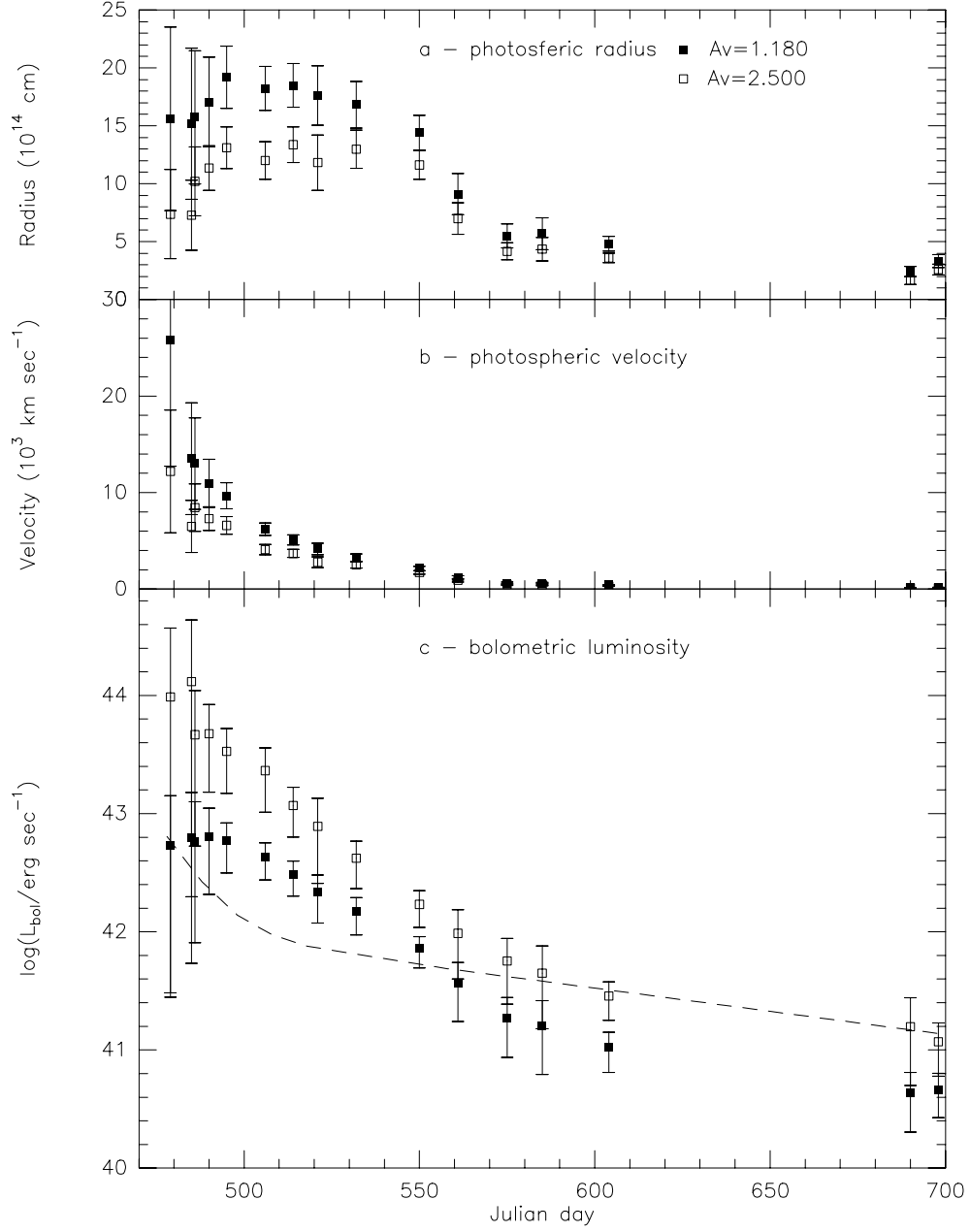


Fig. 8.— **a** Photospheric radius, **b** photospheric velocity and **c** bolometric luminosity for different assumptions on the extinction. The dashed curve shows the radioactive decay luminosity of $0.07 M_{\odot}$ of ^{56}Ni .

It appears that the SN 1998S LCs attain a maximum in the NIR some days after those in the optical bands (however, the precise times of occurrence for the optical maxima are uncertain since measurements appear to have begun when the optical light curve had already started declining). Conversely, in the case of SN 1999el the maximum emission in the NIR H and K bands occurs before that in the optical bands, whose maxima almost coincide with that in the NIR J band. The exact time of maxima at H and K bands is uncertain but they seem to have occurred some time before the beginning of our observations. The differences may be appreciated by looking at the color curves shown in Fig. 4. As previously noted, the evolution of $J - H$ and $J - K$ for SN 1999el exhibits an early appearance of a NIR excess (around day 5) and a NIR blueing effect in the first ~ 45 days. This seems observationally well established, since here the NIR LCs sample the SN when it was much brighter than the nearby sources c2 and c3 (see Fig. 1), and thus are easily measurable even though sometimes only partially resolved on SWIRCAM images. Although maxima at NIR wavelengths do appear to have been missed for SN 1998S, nevertheless there is no evidence for an early blueing effect in this case. Furthermore, a NIR excess from SN 1998S is not apparent at early epochs.

One possible origin of the quoted differences, in particular of the early NIR excess may be due to an IR echo from pre-existing dust in the vicinity of SN 1999el not evaporated at the moment of the shock outburst. This would suggest that dust clumps near SN 1999el are distributed differently than those near SN 1998S which may be devoid of nearby dust entirely. For SN 1998S this is supported by Leonard et al. (2000) whose spectroscopic observations suggest that the progenitor of SN 1998S underwent a major mass-loss episode that ended some 60 years before the explosion, followed by a weaker scarcely detectable mass-loss activity in the last seven years before the explosion. If a mass-loss wind associated with the SN 1999el progenitor had not ceased at the time of explosion, the density of the CSM around it would be much larger than in the case of SN 1998S.

In the above scenario, the interaction of the UV flash with the CSM around SN 1999el would have led to heating, destruction and sublimation of dust. The extent of the region where grain sublimation and destruction can occur may be estimated as (see, e. g., Waxman & Draine 2000)

$$R_0 = 3.7 \times 10^{19} (Q_{\text{abs}} L_{49} a_{01}^{-1})^{\frac{1}{2}} \text{cm} \quad (1)$$

where Q_{abs} is the grain absorption efficiency at UV wavelengths, L_{49} the maximum luminosity in the range 1–7.5 eV in units of $10^{49} \text{ erg s}^{-1}$ (optical-UV flash) and a_{01} the mean size of grains in units of $0.1 \mu\text{m}$. Assuming $Q_{\text{abs}} \sim 1$ and $a_{01} \sim 1$, $R_0 \sim 10^{17} \text{ cm}$ is obtained for a maximum luminosity of $10^{44} \text{ erg s}^{-1}$ (the greatest value indicated in Table 5), a distance which is two orders of magnitude larger than the largest photospheric radius attained by the supernova (see Table 5), but also somewhat greater than the estimate based on the occurrence of the

NIR excess very early (see Sect. 3.2). Since the grain destruction and sublimation due to the UV flash imply also the unlocking of Fe ions (if they exist in the dust), we have been tempted to ascribe the early 45 days blueing to [FeII] line emission. The [FeII] lines which may affect J and H bands result from the transitions involving metastable levels $a^6D_{9/2}-a^4D_{7/2}$ ($\lambda = 1.26 \mu\text{m}$, $A = 5.6 \times 10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}$) and $a^4F_{9/2}-a^6D_{7/2}$ ($\lambda = 1.64 \mu\text{m}$, $A = 1.9 \times 10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}$), collisionally excited by free electrons (see Mouri, Kawara, & Taniguchi 2000, and references therein). Very large line integrated fluxes (up to 0.5–1 times the continuum flux integrated on the K band; see Fig. 5) would be required to produce the observed changes in colors, indicating that [FeII] lines alone cannot account for it. In addition, since relative luminosity of the main [FeII] lines in the J and H windows is constant, the contribution of this mechanism to the color evolution is definitively ruled out.

If the early IR excess of SN 1999el is due to the presence of a CSM generated by a continuous wind of the progenitor star, it might be reasonable to expect its signature in the optical light curves. This seems not to be the case. Roscherr and Schaefer (2000) analysed theoretically the modifications of optical LCs supernovae produced by echo processes. They assume spherical symmetry for the dust and find that critical parameters are r_{min} , r_{max} and τ , where r_{min} and r_{max} are the inner and outer radii of the dust shell and τ the optical depth in the R band for a purely radial photon trajectory, a quantity directly related with the total mass of dust. Roscherr and Schaefer (2000) find that, in the case of thick shells, τ is the more sensitive parameter. Changes in τ effect changes in the luminosity of light maxima in various bands whose amounts depend on the wavelength range. Even the time at which the light maximum is attained may be shifted (by up to several days; Roscherr, private communication) according to its wavelength. Unfortunately, these computations do not address the NIR bands. The decline rate is also strongly affected by changes in τ at levels once again dependent on wavelength. In this respect a relevant parameter is the $\beta_{100,B}$ index which corresponds to the luminosity drop in 100 days in the B band. Therefore the $\beta_{100,B}$ index can provide information on the presence of a CSM around the SN. Observational data provide a value of $\beta_{100,B}$ greater than 4 mag for both SN 1999el and 1998S. A comparison with the theoretical results quoted above suggests the surprising result that the expected amount of dust surrounding both SN 1999el and SN 1998S should be vanishingly small. (Or that almost all the pre-existing dust is evaporated at the moment of the UV flash).

For SN 1999el this result is in contrast with the suggestion that the early IR excess is due to an IR echo caused by near-by dust.

We suggest that the failure of the $\beta_{100,B}$ index to display the presence of CSM around SN 1999el may be ascribed to the assumption made to derive theoretically this index, namely the assumption of spherically distributed dust.

The theoretical results of Emmering and Chevalier (1988) on the IR echo light originated by an asymmetric CSM distribution around a SN progenitor clearly illustrate how many parameters influence the observed results. Indeed they find that IR light curves can substantially change by varying the geometrical properties of a given non-spherical (but still axi-symmetric) CSM distribution and/or its orientation relative to the line of sight. Even if not explicitly accounted for in their work it can be nevertheless deduced that additional parameters, such as a non-radial density profile of the dust, play an additional pivotal role.

We intend in the future to provide a tentative model of the dust distribution around SN 1999el. Finally we note that both for SN 1998S (Fassia et al. 2000) and SN 1999el the observations do not rule out a scenario of dust formation after the explosion. In the case of SN 1999el an occurrence like this would imply that the signature of dust appears both at early and also at late stages. In particular, for SN 1999el assuming $A_V = 1.18$ mag, the dereddened K magnitude on JD+691 (see Table 2) yields an observed flux of 1.2×10^{-13} erg $\text{cm}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1} \mu\text{m}^{-1}$. As in Sect. 3.2, we can determine the radius of a blackbody-emitting surface for a temperature of 1500 K, which is roughly the sublimation temperature for dust grains. This amounts to $\sim 3 \times 10^{15}$ cm, of the order of the largest photospheric radius attained (see Table 5), a distance that might be covered by dust formed in the ejecta moving with a velocity $\sim 1600 \text{ km s}^{-1}$.

Therefore the scenario we propose embraces the evolution of the progenitor star in that cold, high-luminosity, mass loss from evolved massive stars may proceed in episodes with asymmetric distributions. It is however conceivable that single mass-loss episodes are not completely stochastic in duration, periodicity and intensity. Over long temporal intervals, possibly covering several cycles of activity, it is possible to define mean wind properties, such as, for example, the dependence of the mean mass-loss rate on the main structural parameters such as temperature and luminosity. If the SN explosion occurs during a long pause in mass-loss we observe a normal Type II SN, otherwise the typical features of the Type IIn SNe will appear with varying degrees of visibility.

5. Conclusions

Optical and NIR light curves have been presented for the Type IIn SN 1999el. These data, in comparison with those of SN 1998S, suggest that the progenitor star of SN 1999el was still undergoing a probably asymmetric mass loss episode at the moment of the explosion. Dust was already present in the expanding circumstellar envelope. Dust lying in the inner $\sim 10^{16}$ cm evaporated at the outburst.

Later, on, the evolution of NIR colors seems to be affected by the echo light from a pre-existing asymmetrically expanding envelope. In the absence of mass loss SN 1999el would have been presumably observed as a bona-fide linear Type II SN. The way in which mass loss occurs in the last evolutionary phases of massive stars seems to be responsible for various observed departures of Type II SNe from the standard II-L and II-P behavior.

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